

The new stimulus bill, and holding Bushies accountable

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***Good Times*, Santa Cruz, Calif.**

Jan. 5, 2009

There's talk that the Democrats will put together a new stimulus bill quickly enough to get it on President-elect Barack Obama's desk right when he's sworn in. What do you think that bill should look like, in terms of what projects get money and how the spending is apportioned fairly to benefit all citizens?

The first order of business in January will be an economic stimulus package to shore up our economy. I think the broader public is finally realizing just how much trouble we're facing and is realizing that federal intervention is our best bet for a quick recovery.

Congress has already staved off a collapse of Wall Street with the financial industry rescue package and kept 4.5 million Americans employed after convincing the president to offer loans to the auto industry. But we're still seeing tens of thousands of Americans losing their jobs each month.

The bottom line is that we're facing a perfect storm that threatens to devastate our economy. Consumers, fearful of losing their jobs and mindful of the housing market collapse, are spending a lot less money. At the same time, businesses are increasingly wary of the financial turbulence and are stockpiling cash and laying off workers. The two big spenders in our economy have effectively closed their wallets.

If the government doesn't step in to fill this void, the recession we're in will be deeper and longer and many more people will lose their jobs. President-elect Obama's advisers warn that without action, the national unemployment rate could easily climb over 9 percent and we could lose 3 to 4 million jobs. California already faces an unemployment rate well over 8 percent.

So that brings us to the stimulus plan that is currently being discussed. I expect to see the final version address most, if not all, of the following areas: national infrastructure, health care,

energy projects, federal training programs and state government solvency.

We've heard a lot on the first piece, national infrastructure and the so-called "shovel-ready" projects. This is smart for two reasons. First, there are plenty of vital infrastructure projects that have been neglected for years but are ready to go today. That means there are jobs that could be created immediately. Second, as we saw with the 2007 interstate bridge collapse in Minnesota, we really need to turn our attention to our crumbling roads, bridges and other construction projects, including schools and housing programs.

Health care reform and renewable energy initiatives are two areas we heard a lot about during the election, and I expect the stimulus will direct funding toward both. There are a wide range of health care programs that face budget crises, and we must make sure as many Americans are insured as possible. Obama has promised to overhaul our health care system, and this stimulus will be the first salvo toward that end.

Democrats are also dedicated to weaning the nation off foreign oil, and the first step is to bolster our homegrown, alternative energy resources. The energy industry is also an area that, once ramped up to full capacity, will employ many thousands of Americans in high-paying, high-tech jobs.

I also suspect we'll see a lot of money directed toward a variety of federal programs, especially job training and education. As our economy continues to move away from manufacture and into more advanced white collar and service industries, we must make sure our workforce has the training necessary to keep up. Providing these opportunities at the federal level is a vital part of making sure Americans are prepared for the jobs that become available.

Finally, here at home we're seeing what happens when a state starts to run out of funds. The budgetary problems we're witnessing in California threaten many important programs, and we're not the only state facing a shortfall. I expect to see a significant amount of money directed toward states to expand a broad swathe of programs from Medicaid to tuition assistance to law enforcement.

Obama hopes to inject enough money into the economy to kick start a recovery, and in the process create or save more than 3 million jobs. Keeping Americans employed puts more

money into the economy and frees up government funds for vital programs, and is the best medicine for what ails the nation.

The role of the federal government is to help local communities get back on track. But it's a two-way street. Communities must make sure that taxpayers get the best bang for the buck. Our local elected officials must make certain the best programs are the ones that see federal dollars.

We must seize this opportunity to enact the change that has so energized our nation. I truly believe that for every crisis, there's an opportunity. We have a chance to change the way we do business in Washington. This is a high risk time for our nation, but it's also a chance for high gain.

Do you believe there is a need to investigate any members of the Bush administration for war crimes?

As with any individual, if there is evidence of crime it must be pursued. I trust in our new administration and in our international governing bodies to do the right thing.

Any action taken against the Bush administration must be based on facts and not be influenced by politics. Our judicial system deserves better. On a practical level, President Obama must not be saddled with accusations or impressions of political retribution. On a more fundamental level, we owe it to ourselves to not stoop to low levels.

The law is the law, and I trust it will be carried out.